A Rise In Pay/Pay Rise

Taking photos for driving licence, passports or anything for the customers became an extra extension to the pharmacy’s business.

Jack was a keen photographer. This interest gave him a reason to occupy the upper floor of the premises. Helping to secure the rental of the property. There were quiet times, in the shop, especially when the GPs surgery hours closed.

I was hooked when he introduced me to photography.

Dympna looked after the sales as Tom and I processed the negatives. Swamping the photos in the setting solution trays in the semi dark. All equipment was in place like a proper photographer's premise. Loving this side of the job. Becoming good at taking the photos, I was often given use of that Nikon Nikkormat camera. 'State of the art' camera as Tom described it.

So taking a job of being a part time reporter for the local Armagh Gazette to the astonishment of my family. I was loaned free use of Jack's camera. That's how well he trusted me. Sending off little snip bits of happenings along with

a photo helped boost my pay. Those news bits earned a nice wee sum of money especially when accompanied by those special snaps.

Being full of energy following the fire trucks or occasional ambulance was not too difficult in our wee town. But there was a downside. A side that didn’t occur in my brain. Privacy was an issue. Indeed a more important issue was consent.

Joseph was a police man originally from Belfast. A group of us friends befriended him. Being posted to our border town, with his wife, he was not much older

than us. Having owned a racing greyhound, we loved joining him for walks to exercise his dog. He too enjoyed the craic.

When on duty, Joe, as he was known would pop into our cycle shop, sometimes to the chemist shop and occasionally too, to the cinema. Where some of us helped in the ticket office. Keady was a quiet town. Never too often a police man was needed except for a drunken row or occasional car crash or theft.

With Jack’s trusted camera on my shoulder, us friends, Marie and Jimmy set off for a walk with Joe who proudly announced his

greyhound won the local race. He was so pleased as he agreed to having his photo taken with the prized dog. That was my weekly story I proudly sent off to the Gazette. Picture perfect with a full column on Joe’s prize winning dog and photo relating its owner as being a local policeman. Our friendship ended then. Never was the same.

Police men weren’t allowed to race dogs. To have any other profit except as a police man. Years later he left the force. Still a relatively young man he moved his family out of town. Local gossip ‘ninnes’ declared he was intimidated, maybe, because of

his religion. More likely being a police man during those early years of ‘The Troubles’, perhaps he was warned to ‘mind’ himself. That seemed more plausible. He was the only catholic police man in Keady.

Another time, Tom gave me the job of taking a photo of a prized pig. The farm owner asked Jack if he would snap his pig before it was ready for slaughter. Jack didn’t want to step out of the domain of passport and driving licence photos. Didn’t want also to refuse that good customer. So guess what? He sent me!

Well that large prize pig just kept trotting around the yard at the farm. Wouldn’t remain still until finally, at the wall of the farmhouse, the cows feeding trough caught its eye. So snapping a few photos, while the pig was chewing the meal posing still, was all I could manage. Collecting the photos, Sammy the farmer, almost yelled out his dismay as he saw those ‘stills’. “My pig is now dead. Slaughtered,” he cried. “These pictures are not worth a damn.”

We knew what he meant. The almost white pig faded against the whitewashed gabled end of his home. That part time career of

photography ended then for me. My seventeen year old self gave up that enjoyable formality of sending news items to the paper. Though I continued enjoying the photograph side of the chemist shop, there was an itchiness in my head thoughts of leaving the job. The wage was so low with no prospect of a rise. I announced after being refused a pay rise from Tom that leaving was the best thing to do. Marching out that day, shocked everyone. Jack, Dympna, my sisters then my mother. She was so shocked.

“You’ll sign on ‘the dole,’” she screamed at me. “Young hussie,

don’t know what to be at. You heart scold brat.”

It felt mortifying the next day standing in that long queue in the ‘Market House’ upstairs. Waiting to sign on. That sick feeling only got worse as we nudged closer to the desk. Suddenly feeling Jack slither to my side, I felt a sense of relief. “You really don’t want to do this Katie. All is forgiven. Just come back and we’ll work something out,” knowing my mother had intervened. I wondered what pay rise offer he would make. Securing the buttons on the newly laundered white coat, it was if it hadn’t happened. That pay rise was never offered.

But a plan began to form in my head. A plan to soon leave. Enjoying the smells of medicines and the crushed compounds of powders for cures. Simply advising customers of remedies for the minor ailments of their day put me in the notion of training to become a nurse. But not just yet.

Those trips in Jack’s blue Volkswagen Beatle to the ceilis. To the music sessions in the country ‘til the wee hours of the morning. Dympna, my sister Noreen and I all ‘stuffed’ in. Were the happiest of times. Too good to give up any time soon. That idea was parked at the back of my

mind to resurface when I'd become eighteen or so.

Jack also played his accordion as part of a family ceili band called 'The Treanor Brothers,' often enticing Dympna and I to their sessions of practice. Then to the dances where they performed.

Tommy Makem who became famous with the Clancy brothers as an 'Irish folk group,' was a close friend of Jack. Often calling into the chemist shop when home on leave. Home from tours of America where that Irish group reached the top of their fame.

His parents lived in Keady. His brother in the country. Derrynoose. Manys a music session too we joined in his home there. Another Jack. There is a photo of me sitting beside Tommy, Jack and the pharmacist Jack. It sits on our ‘mantle piece’ to this very day. When glancing at it occasionally, those memories flood back.

The day we visited Sarah Makem, Tommy’s mother on our lunch break. The door was ajar as we stepped into that warm kitchen where she made us tea from the kettle quietly boiling on the warm hearth. Filling up the mugs she gently burst into song.

Sweetly singing a very old Irish ballad, one of many she had inherited. Songs that made her famous to this day.

Memories of all the music, singing and dance in that quiet wee border town. Remain within our hearts forever. All make up for the lack of rise in our pay.